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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 NEW DELHI 000749

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: HIGH TURNOUT IN FIRST ROUND OF J&K LOCAL ELECTIONS

Classified By: DCM Robert O. Blake, Jr. Reasons 1.4 (B, D)

1. (C) Summary: Consolidating the pattern set in other recent state elections, Kashmiris turned out in large numbers in municipal elections Strong First Round Showing

2. (U) Preliminary results from the first round of municipal elections held in North Kashmir on January 30 show strong support for the govt. Town 2005 2002 Baramulla 38 24 Uri 78 66 Sopore 25 8 Bandipora 60

3. (U) The ruling PDP-Congress coalition appears to have done well, sweeping a majority in seven of nine towns in Baramulla and Kupwara districts. The surprise was the strong performance of the Awami League, founded by Kukka Parray, a former militant who was assassinated in 2003 after c Finance Minister Muzaffar Beig called the turnout an "eyeopener for the Hurriyat," observing sharply that "boycotting elections does not c Strong Anti-Poll Campaign

4. (U) These elections follow a vigorous boycott campaign for which all major separatist groups weighed in. Both moderate and hardline fac Moderate Hurriyat leader Abbas Ansari dismissed reports of high turnouts, commenting that "lines in front of polling booths do not matter,"

5. (C) After several weeks of agitation, however, separatist opposition may be weakening. The Mirwaiz ignored the issue at Friday prayers They voted for their civic problems." Targetted Violence Sparks Candidates Withdrawals

6. (U) Since nomination papers were filed, terrorists have attacked candidates from all major political parties, killing at least three. 7 Election Details

7. (U) These polls are to elect Mayors and 3 City Councils and 30 Committees (the latter in smaller towns) across J&K, positions that have

8. (U) Polling will proceed as follows: Baramulla and Kupwara Municipal Council - January 29 Srinagar Municipal Corporation - February 1 J Comment

9. (C) The first round is further evidence that Kashmiris clearly want to influence, if they cannot determine, their own affairs. As durir

10. (C) Given the relatively lower stakes, we did not observe these polls (as we did in 2002 and 2004), and cannot comment on the credibili Suggested Press Guidance

11. (U) We recommend the following guidance:
We welcome the Indian government's decision to hold Municipal Corporation and Municipal Council/Committee elections in J&K after a hiatus c We have seen initial reports from the first round from January 30 polling in North Kashmir. These reports indicate strong voter participat These reports are encouraging, as they demonstrate Kashmiris' continuing desire to participate in the political process and to restore a se MULFORD